

'This mystery and nightmare of imagination': A review of the use of spirits, ghosts, and aliens in Antarctic imaginative writing.

Abstract: As a comparatively unknown space, the Antarctic has provided centuries of writers with the opportunity to tell stories involving 'otherly presences' – spirits, ghosts, and aliens. This review examines eleven texts, covering a range of periods, forms, and cultures, from Coleridge's 1798 poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', to a Russian novel written during the Cold War, to a 2008 American short story. The review examines the nature of the otherly presences in the texts and explores the representations of the Antarctic encoded within them. It then shows how a wider discussion about the nature of knowledge arises from this interaction, in particular debates about objective versus subjective knowledge and the question of dangerous knowledge.

In a short story published in the late 1920s, an expedition to the South Pole discovers a tent bulging strangely on one side. Two expeditioners look inside the tent, and, driven mad by what they see, beg a third not to investigate. 'The thing itself,' the third responds, 'can't be any worse than this mystery and nightmare of imagination'.¹ Mystery, nightmare, and imagination, and the questions about knowledge implicit in this sentence, have strong pedigrees in imaginative writing set in the Antarctic. This vast region about which very little was, and arguably remains, known has for centuries presented writers with the opportunity to locate stories involving 'otherly presences' – spirits, ghosts, and extraterrestrials (aliens) – in a setting in which 'almost anything could be hidden'.² Two processes function, here: the Antarctic as a setting allows the otherly presences to exist; and the otherly presences allow the Antarctic to be described, as a place, and interrogated, as an idea. A third theme then emerges from this two-way flow – a wider

¹ John Martin Leahy, 'In Amundsen's Tent', in Bill Manhire (ed.), *The Wide White Page: Writers Imagine Antarctica*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2004, p. 125.

² Elizabeth Leane, 'Locating the Thing: The Antarctic as Alien Space in John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?"', *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, July 2005, p. 226.

discussion about the nature of knowledge. This study will review the use of otherly presences in Antarctic imaginative writing by outlining the nature of several such presences from selected texts of various forms, periods, and cultures. It will then look at how these various otherly presences are used to represent the Antarctic, before considering how the debate about knowledge is played out in different texts.

The types of otherly presences in Antarctic literature are mostly easily broken into three categories based on their relationship with the stories' human protagonists: friendly, neutral, and hostile. When confronted with the unknown, one reaction is hope for what it may hold. Gustavus Pope's 1894 'scientific romance', *Journey to Mars*, demonstrates this utopian approach. An American naval lieutenant travels south where he meets a colony of Martians.³ At first he takes them to be human, although they are red, blue, or yellow of skin, and exceptionally handsome and graceful. The leader has 'dark lustrous hair' hanging 'in heavy curls down his neck', 'dark and beautiful eyes', and a form that is 'lithe and a perfect model of manly beauty'.⁴ They have beautiful singing voices, and when he learns their language he discovers it is superior to any other. Over time he also finds them to be friendly, compassionate, honourable, and technologically advanced. The ghosts of Marie Darrieussecq's 2003 French novel *White* are also fairly friendly.⁵ The story follows two people, Edmee and Peter, coming to a European station at the South Pole, and their developing relationship. The narrators, and often the instigators of the plot, however, are a mass of undifferentiated ghosts dwelling at the Pole. They are melancholy and lonely beings, but also curious, hopeful, and helpful, their goal seeming to be the blossoming of Edmee and Peter's love. They are playful and child-like, wishing they could play a trick and move a fuel container, and, while accompanying Edmee on a sickeningly rough Southern Ocean crossing,

³ Gustavus W. Pope, *Journey to Mars*, 1894, reprinted by Wildside Press, Maryland, 2008.

⁴ Pope, p. 42.

⁵ Marie Darrieussecq, trans. Ian Monk, *White*, Faber and Faber, London, 2005.

‘having a whale of a time’ as the waves roll the ship.⁶ The spirits of Catherynne Valente’s 2008 short story ‘A Buyer’s Guide to Maps of Antarctica’ seem generally pleasant – the cartographer Villalba Maldonado appears to have been on good terms with, for example, the enormous Antarctic hound spirits Grell and Skell.⁷ At the end of the story the dogs appear to Maldonado’s daughter, pressing ‘their noses into her hands’ and licking ‘her face slowly, methodically, with great care’, before allowing themselves to be harnessed to her sledge.

In other stories, the otherly presences are neutral – or, at least, give no indication otherwise. In the final line of Edgar Allen Poe’s 1837 novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, as Pym is swept into a ‘cataract’ in the sea at the South Pole, a ‘shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men’ arises above the water, with skin ‘the perfect whiteness of snow’.⁸ As the novel finishes here, it is unclear what this figure is, and its attitude towards Pym – if it has one at all. The Old Ones, ancient aliens thawed by a scientific expedition in H. P. Lovecraft’s 1936 novella *At the Mountains of Madness*, although they murder and perform autopsies on humans and dogs when they awake, are revealed to have been of great cultural sophistication at their civilisation’s height.⁹ They are found murdered towards the end of the novella, and the scene is described with sadness and pathos. ‘Poor Devils!’ the protagonist writes. ‘After all, they were not evil things of their kind’.¹⁰ A Russian novel written during the Cold War tells another story of aliens in the Antarctic, this time rose-coloured clouds that are methodically removing the ice sheet, and which create identical, fully

⁶ *ibid*, pp. 23, 29-30.

⁷ Catherynne M. Valente, ‘A Buyer’s Guide to Maps of Antarctica’, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, Issue 20, May 2008, http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/valente_05_08/, accessed 10 December 2010.

⁸ Edgar Allen Poe, *The Narrative of Athur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, Edited with an Introduction and Commentary, including Jules Verne’s Sequel Le Sphinx des Glaces*, edited by Harold Beaver, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1975, first published 1837, p. 239.

⁹ H. P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, in Bill Manhire (ed.), *The Wide White Page: Writers Imagine Antarctica*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2004.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 197.

sentient copies of humans.¹¹ It is never established what these creatures are doing (although there is some agreement on a theory) but they do not seem antagonistic – other, that is, than for the doubles they create. Shortly after creation, these doubles are unwillingly removed – disintegrated, seemingly – by the aliens. The double of one character, Zernov, muses: ‘It is terrible to know of your own end and not to have any way of putting it off ... I so terribly want to live’. In the 1975 novel *The White Ship*, the ghost of a young Spanish woman marooned in the early nineteenth century on a sub-Antarctic island possesses a twentieth-century woman and causes her to seek out the body and give it a Christian burial.¹² The pathetic ghost simply wants help – but goes about seeking it in a fairly aggressive manner.

The bulk of otherly presences in Antarctic literature, however – five of the eleven covered in this review – are hostile to humanity. In the 1798 poem ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes a dangerous ‘Polar Spirit’ ‘from the land of mist and snow’.¹³ Seeking vengeance for the Mariner’s murder of an albatross, the spirit follows the Mariner’s ship to the equator, where it dwells ‘Under the keel nine fathom deep’.¹⁴ The ship is becalmed, the Mariner’s crew turned into zombies, and the Mariner punished and finally condemned to walk the Earth telling his story. In John Leahy’s 1928 short story ‘In Amundsen’s Tent’, John Campbell’s 1936 short story ‘Who Goes There?’, and Lovecraft’s novella, we find unquestionably aggressive, bloodthirsty aliens.¹⁵ The creature discovered ‘in

¹¹ Aleksandr Abramov and Sergei Abramov, trans. George Yankovsky, *Horsemen From Nowhere*, Mir Publishers, Moscow, 1969, http://lib.ru/RUFANT/ABRANOW/abramovy_vsadniki_niotkuda-engl.txt, accessed 28 November 2010.

¹² Ian Cameron, *The White Ship*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1975.

¹³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, edited by Paul H. Fry, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: Complete, Authoritative Texts of the 1798 and 1817 Versions with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Bedford/St. Martin’s, Boston and New York, 1999, Inn. 131-133.

¹⁴ *ibid*, ln. 381.

¹⁵ John W. Campbell, ‘Who Goes There?’, 1938, <http://www.scaryforkids.com/who-goes-there-by-john-w-campbell/>, accessed 4 December 2010.

Amundsen's tent' pursues the fleeing expeditionary party for days, picking them off one by one before leaving the head of the final expeditioner to be discovered by the narrator. Campbell's alien seeks to violently devour and imitate any life it meets. The murderer of the Old Ones in Lovecraft's tale is revealed to be a shoggoth, a massive, devouring bulk of protoplasmic slime, from which the explorers only just escape. A less physical attack on humanity is that of the angel Antarctica in Tony Kushner's 1995 play, *Angels in America*.¹⁶ The angels representing the world's continents are discussing the imminent Chernobyl nuclear disaster:

Europa: Hundreds, thousands will die.

Oceania: Horribly. Hundreds of thousands.

Africanii: Millions.

Antarctica: Let them. Uncountable multitudes. Horrible. It is by their own hands. I I I will rejoice to see it ... I I I do not weep for *them*, I I I I weep for the vexation of the Blank Spaces, I weep for the Dancing Light...¹⁷

This is perhaps the least physically hostile, but certainly the most consciously and bitterly hostile of these otherly presences' attitudes to humanity.

Antarctica provides these otherly presences with an enthralling location; ghosts, spirits, and aliens in return provide devices through which the Antarctic as both a physical space and an idea can be represented and investigated. For critic Elena Glasberg, 'fictions of Antarctica are not shaped by what Antarctica is but only what it comes to figure for those encountering it'.¹⁸ These figures have often been 'sustained by certain established facts'

¹⁶ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika*, Theatre Communications Group, New York, 1995.

¹⁷ Kushner, pp. 261-2.

¹⁸ Elena Glasberg, *Antarcticas of the Imagination: American Authors Explore the Last Continent, 1818-1982*, PhD thesis, Indiana University, 1995, p. 6.

recovered by explorative and scientific expeditions, certainly, but the 'interplay of Antarctic fact and Antarctic fancy' means that in the end 'Antarctica is an intertextual construction, a place that is not a place, but a matter of textuality'.¹⁹ Otherly presences – in the European mind, at least – fit naturally with Antarctica, making them prime mechanisms of this textuality. '[T]he ice-covered landscape of the Antarctic was perceived by many as hostile, unearthly, and surreal', writes Elizabeth Leane, corresponding easily with the bulk of otherly presences.²⁰ The Antarctic also represented to Europeans a reversal of the 'right' order of things: half a year of day, half a year of night; summer in the European wintertime; snow and ice in that summer. '[H]ere was a place,' writes Francis Spufford, 'where nature behaved like fantasy'.²¹ 'Finding Antarctica has always been a paper chase', Glasberg concludes, and otherly presences have been some of that chase's most prominent agents.²²

How do 'friendly' otherly presences represent the Antarctic, then? For utopians such as Pope, it is a place of hope, progress, and purity where a more perfect race chooses to live. This sense of possibility is also contained in Darrieussecq's ghost-laden South Pole:

The bottom of the world, the pivot zone, the meeting of curves, the crucible of magnetic fields, here, everything is possible: impressions, noises, fatigue, thawed objects, states of mind, blown-up ideas, the end of worlds ...²³

For the ghosts themselves, the 'South Pole is our identity, like the sea for the melancholic, the *chaise-longue* for the consumptive, or an empty room for the

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 5.

²⁰ Leane, p. 226.

²¹ Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, Faber and Faber, London and Boston, 1996, p. 77.

²² Glasberg, p. 6.

²³ Darrieussecq, p. 47.

amnesiac'.²⁴ 'Antarctica,' they say, 'is our geographical equivalent' – an inhuman, blank, ongoing, frozen, and yet shifting place.²⁵ Valente's Antarctic continues the theme of possibility. Her story traces the relationship between two rival, high profile, nineteenth century Argentinean cartographers. Acuna produces exquisitely accurate maps of the Antarctic, while the aforementioned Maldonado's otherwise accurate maps also contain details of spirits such as the Pole, who sits motionless on her throne of 'try pots and harpoon blades', and her guardians, the hounds Grell and Skell. 'I promised you, my friend', Maldonado says sadly to Acuna, 'that it was big enough. Big enough for us both to look on it and hold in our vision two separate countries, bound only by longitude'. Valente's represents Antarctica as 'big enough', both as a space and as an idea, to contain many possibilities and truths.

The neutral or unknown otherly presences' representations of the Antarctic are more straightforward: they show a place that is, quite simply, indifferent to humanity. It was hard to imagine the polar plateau, the Transantarctic Mountains, or a katabatic wind responding to human concerns. With modern understanding of the interactions between the Antarctic and the rest of the world, and of anthropogenic climate change's effects in the Antarctic, these representations may decline.

The representation of the Antarctic contained in the hostile presences is, perhaps, unsurprising. As an environment seemingly inimical to human, if not all, life, projecting hostility onto the Antarctic is simple. Coleridge's 'spirit who bideth by himself / In the land of mist and snow' is powerful and vengeful, while the predatory alien menace that pursues Leahy's expeditioners across the polar plateau unforgivingly kills the men one by one.²⁶ Antarctica's confusing scale, where a lack of reference points removes an ability to judge distance, is reflected in humans' confusion dealing with these otherly threats. Leahy's last expeditioner writes: 'Think it is the 11th

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 35.

²⁵ *ibid*.

²⁶ Coleridge, *Inn*. 406-7.

but not sure. I can no longer be sure of anything – save that I am alone and that it is watching me’.²⁷ When a test shows that one of two men is a duplicate alien in ‘Who Goes There?’ without being able to prove which, the two are thrown into a reasoning tailspin, unable to think their way out. ‘I gave proof that the test was wrong,’ muses one, ‘which seems to prove I’m human, and now Garry has given that argument which proves me human – which he, as the monster, should not do. Round and round...’.

Leane has argued that the alien in ‘Who Goes There?’, and thus the Antarctic, is an example of the abject – this could be extended to all of the hostile otherly presences identified here, and thus with such representations of the Antarctic in general.²⁸ The ‘abject’ is a force that dissolves or breaches – or threatens to – the boundary between inner and outer spaces, collapsing the subject and object into one. Campbell’s alien is painfully abject: reanimated from a seeming corpse, it crosses the boundary between alive and dead; a shapeshifter, its ‘bodily boundaries’ are ‘ill-defined’; and it ‘enforces its disrespect for ... subject/object distinctions on the expeditioners themselves, literally dissolving [their] bodily boundaries’.²⁹ Lovecraft’s shoggoth is similarly abject: the protagonist describes it as

[f]ormless protoplasm able to mock and reflect all forms and organs and processes – viscous agglutinations of bubbling cells – rubbery fifteen-foot spheroids infinitely plastic and ductile – slaves of suggestion...³⁰

The rose-clouds of *Horsemen from Nowhere* are similarly abject, as is the dead-but-alive, asleep-but-awake experience of the protagonist when examined by the clouds: ‘I slept and didn’t, and dreamt incoherently and formlessly, yet at

²⁷ Leahy, p. 131.

²⁸ Leane, p. 229-230.

²⁹ Leane, p. 233.

³⁰ Lovecraft, p. 231.

the same time I was positive that this was no dream at all'.³¹ In Coleridge the abject is at work in 'the decaying bird hung around the old sailor's neck, the zombie-sailors who man the ship ... and his own seemingly undead state'.³² 'For Campbell, as for Lovecraft, Leahy, Coleridge, and Poe before him,' concludes Leane,

the Antarctic represented more than a conveniently large blank space on the map, and more than a generically hostile setting: it signified instead an instability at the margins of the subject and the margins of the world.³³

This instability is inherent in the hostile, boundary-crossing otherly creatures identified here: alive, but dead; spiritual, but material; physical, but not bound by the same physical laws.

This reciprocity between Antarctica and otherly presences in Antarctic literatures creates space for a larger epistemological discussion to be worked out in these texts. As a place which has until recently been, and perhaps remains, to a great degree unknown, and in which are placed mysterious entities, the question of knowledge is extremely pertinent. What is the nature of knowledge? How is it created, held, and transmitted? Is there good and bad knowledge? All of these questions are explored as human protagonists meet and deal with the spirits, ghosts, and aliens of Antarctic writing. Two major areas arise in particular: a debate between objective, rational knowledge and subjective, emotional knowledge; and the matter of dangerous or 'wrong' knowledge.

Contemporary with many of these texts, and in the cultural milieu informing the others, was the rise of Romanticism and, to characterise it

³¹ One wonders about the degree to which the Abramovs were consciously emulating Campbell and Lovecraft.

³² Leane, p. 231.

³³ *ibid*, p. 236.

crudely, its emphasis on emotion, instinct, and subjectivity over the Enlightenment's virtues of rationalism, empiricism, and science – a conflict visible in these texts. Some, such as Campbell and Leahy, defend objective knowledge. Although Campbell's tale warns against untrammelled scientific enquiry, his hero, McReady, uses scientific reasoning to devise a blood test that finally identifies the alien imitations.³⁴ Leahy captures the conflict in the words used in the introduction: 'The thing itself ... can't be any worse than this mystery and nightmare of imagination'.³⁵

Most, however, are less certain about the preeminence of rational knowledge. Coleridge and Poe's stories were based on accounts of Cook's voyages and natural history volumes, but countered this base of empirical knowledge with, for Poe especially, skepticism 'of the power of scientific enquiry to explain the natural universe', leading to the Antarctic being shown, in Coleridge's *Polar Spirit* and Poe's shrouded figure, as a place of 'alienness and inaccessibility ... [A] symbol not merely of the unexplored but of the unexplorable – a realm beyond the purview of reason'.³⁶ Lovecraft too subscribed to this line of thought, telling a story about a scientific expedition, and contextualizing it with real Antarctic expeditions – his protagonist mentions the activities of Byrd and Mawson, for example – but undermining it with the scientists' inability to comprehend the alien civilisation they uncover. Darriussecq's ghosts agree, disdaining anything like absolute knowledge: 'Above all, we avoid being counted,' and they note that 'precision' is not 'compatible with our nature'.³⁷ Valente's story is the most recent, and perhaps the clearest, argument for the power of the subjective. The story's form is of objective auctioneer's descriptions of maps being offered for sale; it is through these 'buyer's guides' that the narrative

³⁴ Glasberg, 'Who Goes There?', p. 649.

³⁵ Leahy, p. 125.

³⁶ Stephen J. Pyne, *The Ice: A Journey to Antarctica*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1986, p. 164.

³⁷ Darriussecq, pp. 34-5.

proceeds. Moreover, as maps, the objects being sold represent a very particular, Enlightenment way of representing and thinking about space. The two cartographers, Acuna and Maldonado, represent the two sides: Acuna, the objective rationalist, whose lectures against his foe are published posthumously as *On Authenticity*; and Maldonado of the Pole and Grell and Skell, who insists to Acuna: 'As you see I do not, as I see, you disdain. It is big enough'. Maldonado here argues that there is more than one form of knowledge, and more than one truth – that both sets of maps can be accurate at the same time.

The question of dangerous or forbidden knowledge also emerges strongly in these stories, generally agreeing that some things should not be known. In 'Who Goes There?' the biologist Blair's quest for dangerous knowledge leads to the thawing of the alien. Lovecraft's characters see 'infamous, nightmare sculptures' of shoggoths which they judge to be improper 'even when telling of age-old, bygone things; for shoggoths and their work ought not to be seen by human beings or portrayed by any beings'.³⁸ Having escaped the ruined city, they promise to keep their experience secret:

Certain things, we had agreed, were not for people to know and discuss lightly ... It is absolutely necessary, for the peace and safety of mankind, that some of earth's dark, dead corners ... be let alone.³⁹

Danforth, one of these explorers, and Travers and Sutherland, Leahy's expeditioners who look inside Amundsen's tent, end up paying the ultimate price for obtaining such knowledge: they are driven mad. Travers and Sutherland are then even murdered by the object of this knowledge. Sutherland exclaims:

³⁸ Lovecraft, p. 196.

³⁹ *ibid*, p. 208.

We, Travers and I, can never be the same men again – the brains, the souls of us can never be what they were before we saw *that!* ... There are some things that a man should never know; there are some things that a man should never see; that horror there in Amundsen's tent is – both!⁴⁰

Writing concerning spirits, ghosts, and aliens in Antarctica represents a significant portion of Antarctic imaginative writing. In the late nineteenth century H. Rider Haggard complained that there were no more 'safe and secret place[s], unknown to the pestilential accuracy of the geographer' in which truly creative tales could be set.⁴¹ The Antarctic provided just such a place, allowing all manner of otherly presences to be conceived and let loose. These presences repaid their setting by acting as devices for the representation of the Antarctic – a symbiotic relationship. Out of this relationship between an unknown place and unknown entities grew deeper questions about the nature of knowledge. As knowledge of the Antarctic has increased, one might expect such imaginative writing to have receded. This is, however, not the case: in the twentieth century 'fictions ... flourished in the gaps of the new knowledge emerging from the still remote and confounding territory'.⁴² Valente's push for subjective, postmodern knowledge in the Antarctic is a case in point. 'Even 100 years ago Antarctica was indistinct, a location where anything might be found and anything might happen', writes Bill Manhire. 'Today the processes of exploration and definition continue'.⁴³

⁴⁰ Leahy, p. 126.

⁴¹ Quoted in Leane, p. 226.

⁴² Glasberg, 'Who Goes There?', p. 641.

⁴³ Manhire, pp. 9, 10.

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